



Museums in contemporary society

Pandering to Pagans?

Piotr Bienkowski

I do find the whole idea of what is 'heritage' is in ferment – I think most crucially the idea of who has authority over heritage is perhaps the most interesting question.

Emma Restell Orr

We can't treat human remains as objects, as scientific specimens; to do so is an expression of our own clumsy, arrogant, isolated brutality.

Holger Schutkowski

If all human remains were reburied we would basically lose our ability to understand past societies and past human populations because it is the loss of irretrievable information.

Julie Wilkinson

In November 2004, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair authorised the return of indigenous human remains to Australia but his decision would fuel debates much closer to home. Pagan groups in this country have for several years called for the reburial of ancient British remains. Their campaigning challenges conventional notions of who actually owns our heritage and who has the right to make decisions about its care. Piotr Bienkowski is Deputy Director of the Manchester Museum.

Piotre Bienkowski

Over the last few years, as the issue of human remains has actually become, it's become more obvious to people outside museums - a lot of it to do with issues of human remains generally because of the Alder Hey scandal, because of the Bristol Royal Infirmary scandal and therefore the passing of the 2005 Human Tissue Act - people are just more aware that there is an issue around human remains. We have comment boards around our museum including in our Egyptian gallery where we have Egyptian human remains, and every single week we will have a proportion, which are critical who don't specifically describe themselves as pagans.

Julie Wilkinson

The Manchester Museum has made it their policy to listen to both pagans and to other local groups. They organise talks and conferences in order to air the debate more widely. They see this as an essential step in re-examining their own position.

Piotr Bienkowski

More and more communities in this country, in other countries are questioning government or institutional rights to completely control what they regard as their own heritage ...at the very least they want some input into the decision-making processes. None of this necessarily means that museums are handing over control, but this idea of authority and control is a very interesting one. Legally in this country no one can have ownership of a human corpse so if we look at it from that point of view. In what sense do museums have rightful authority and control over human remains? They have custody of them and the law allows them to have custody of them but they don't own them in that sense. Now if that is true I think the least we can do is open up the issue of what we do with them to a wide range of perspectives and then make a final decision based on what the wider public benefits will be.

Julie Wilkinson

So how does this work in practice? The museum's openness was put to the test in 2008, with a temporary exhibition of a body called "Lindow man". Bryan Sitch is curator of archaeology at the Manchester museum, and he was responsible for the exhibition.

Bryan Sitch

What I've noticed in this exhibition is when our visitors come around the corner and see him, they will group around the case and it's different for different members of the audience but they will be quite respectful.....quite, quite hushed.

Julie Wilkinson)

"Lindow man" was found in a Cheshire peat bog in August 1984. He was so well preserved that at first he was thought to be the body of a modern murder victim. Once the coroner had established that he was in fact about 2000 years old, dating back either to the late Iron Age or the early Roman period, he was sent to the British Museum in London.

Bryan Sitch

He's only a partial body I'm afraid, his hips and lower legs are missing apart from the leg that turned up on the Lindow Moss peat conveyor belt in 1984. You'll also notice that the lighting levels here are quite low and we did that deliberately, not simply to help Lindow Man's conservation but also because we wanted to slow down the nature of the interaction between visitors and the body. To make people stop and think. For this not to be a vulgar peep show.

Julie Wilkinson

The body's removal to London caused a fair amount of bitterness in the North West. Lindow Man had struck a chord and a campaign demanded his repatriation. In response, the British Museum allowed him to return to the North West for three temporary visits. The current exhibition is the third of these and like all major exhibitions; it is the result of a long planning process.

Bryan Sitch

The project actually began about 2 years ago when we organised a consultation with a very wide-ranging group of people that included members of the public, elected members of Manchester City Council, archaeologists, museum curators, interested parties of all descriptions and including pagans. And we deliberately mixed up the groups and asked them what they thought the approach to exhibition should be and they told us two things essentially: one, that we should emphasise Lindow Man's sensitivity that he should be treated with respect. Secondly, that we should not just tell one story, but we should acknowledge the fact that there are in fact many stories.

Julie Wilkinson

That idea had to be translated into the design of an exhibition. The curators decided to do this by including the voices of seven people. Each one had their own story to tell, and presented a very different link to Lindow Man.

Bryan Sitch

As we walk through you'll see that the exhibition is laid out in a number of different areas and each area corresponds to the testimony if you like of a particular speaker, a particular interviewee, who has contributed to the exhibition. So for example we have the voice of the people who found Lindow man, we have the voice of a woman who, well now a grown up woman, but originally when she was involved with Lindow man story she was a young girl of about five or six.

Susan Chadwick:

I remember thinking God this is where I live, this is where I play, and it was more excitement than fear....

one of the speakers in Manchester Museum's 2008 Lindow Man exhibition.

... and the first time I saw him was actually at the display, I'd seen him in, obviously all the newspapers had various cuttings and whatnot...

Bryan Sitch

And what's interesting about Susan's story is that she, she not only remembers coming to see Lindow man's body in 1987 I think it was, and she describes Lindow man's body as looking like a school satchel, which is kind of a really spontaneous and honest response to the body, but Susan was also involved in the Lindow Primary School choir, which sang a song as part of a campaign to repatriate Lindow man's body back here to the North West, and so through Susan we have access to that social resonance, the social impact of discovery and here you can see the T-shirt that Susan wore and it says Lindow man we want you back again which was the title of the campaign song.

Julie Wilkinson

When the Lindow community called for Lindow man to come back to the North West, in some ways they were unwittingly aligning themselves with the position of certain British pagans.

Emma Restell

Orr is a druid priestess and a founder of Honouring the Ancient Dead or HAD as it's known. This organisation includes representatives from the very broad spectrum of pagan groups.

Emma Restell Orr

In terms of any human remains I think that one of the most important parts is not to isolate that individual from the landscape so to make it very clear the landscape from which that person comes. To feel the mud, the foliage, the growth, the decay that is the landscape. That connection between humanity and environment is crucial. To a pagan that connection is vital to our health and well-being and to isolate human remains from the environment is an action that is unnatural and so makes me squeamish.

Julie Wilkinson

Honouring the Ancient Dead argues that for many human remains currently residing in museums, a more respectful approach would be to rebury them as close as possible to the place where they were found.

Emma Restell Orr

I know of museums where I have spoken to curators who have boxes, which have been left to the museum, which contain human remains which have not even been opened.

Julie Wilkinson

Because of their concerns about the way these remains are being treated, Honouring the Ancient Dead have drawn up their own guidelines. They see these as advocating 'respect and dignity' for human remains.

Emma Restell Orr

We are not making a claim of special connection in the way that a Maori or an Aboriginal or a native American might claim physical remains of their own proven ancestors through blood through genes. What we are saying is that we have a special interest and that doesn't need justification. Our special interest is founded on our theology our perspective which is that the ancestors are people and their remains are still part of that expression of personhood. ... so yes excavate, yes, research yes show us what you've found but then rebury.

Julie Wilkinson

This position sets Emma Restell Orr in direct opposition to many archaeologists and scientists. Dr. Holger Schutkowski of Bradford University is the Chair of the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology.

Holger Schutkowski

To think that once you have studied a skeletal collection for a certain while will then have completed the scientific analysis of it is a complete misunderstanding of science. The development of new methods also triggers the development of new questions. The

continuous progress of science, of analytical approaches, of new technologies allow us to revisit human remains time after time, to actually add layer upon layer of a much better understanding of past societies, of their lifestyles and lifeways.

Julie Wilkinson

Holger Schutowski's position also questions the claims of community groups like the Lindow community, who have a more social interest in the bodies that were found on their patch.

Holger Schutowski

Well I think in general it's a rather romanticising view that place of the burial of somebody is automatically the place of his or her cultural and social affiliation. We know of a lot of cases, some actually rather prominent, where we can be quite certain that the place of burial is quite circumstantial and has nothing to do with the life history of this particular individual. This of course has repercussions for the ideas that I've always brought forward, that we need to involve local communities much more to decide or discuss the future fate of human remains. Well sometimes discussions with local communities may be completely inappropriate because it hasn't got anything to do with them because they're talking about somebody who was not part even of the ancient community in deep past, so it's a very thorny issue actually and I don't think it's as straightforward as some pagans I have to say would like to see it.

Julie Wilkinson

Despite her reservations about the practices of some museums, Emma Restell Orr decided to work with the Manchester Museum on the Lindow man exhibition. She took part in the consultation, and was also interviewed as one of the "voices" that structure the exhibition. But despite having had an active involvement with the planning, she seems disappointed with the results.

Emma Restell Orr

Though there was significant consultation what the exhibition has shown is that the designers of the exhibition had no comprehension of what that notion of respect was because even in this exhibition he is displayed as a human freak!

It's no different from a Victorian freak show showing dwarves and the women with the hairy beard and giants.. It's an obscenity where people aren't necessarily making money but heritage organisations are maintaining their position by showing freakery.

Julie Wilkinson

But what of the museum-going public? Do they feel the museum has got it right?

Vox-pop Man

I came here about 22 years ago when he was first displayed and I'm still as impressed as I was then, so yeah, it's brilliant.

Vox-pop Woman

I thought it was quite moving. I think it looked like he'd been put into almost like a foetal position and it made it more real life than just seeing a skeleton or something like that.

Vox-pop Man

Amazing preservation, I never expected to see anything preserved in that detail, the head, the hands.

Vox-pop Woman

History, yes I mean I'm interested in history obviously, but whether you've got to dig remains up to find out about them I'm not, no I don't think it's very nice.

Julie Wilkinson

So there are visitors who express reservations about displaying human remains. But there are other visitors who object on a completely different level. Their concern is not about the principle of displaying human remains, but the way the museum has done it. Curator Bryan Sitch reads from the comments board ...

Bryan Sitch

ReadingDisappointed! Felt lots of slightly dubious connections made with little information conveyed. Whoever designed this gallery should be sacked, exclamation mark. Did the budget run over, or was this always planned to look like the museum had raided the Ikea rubbish tip?

Julie Wilkinson

Comments like this seem to challenge the museum's policy of openness to different perspectives. It seems, ironically, that some visitors are wanting a return to something altogether more Victorian.

Bryan Sitch

I think there's something in there that is deeply unsettling in that they expect museums to have the answers. It's a bit as if museums haven't moved on over the past 150yrs, that we are stuck in a sort of Victorian time-warp, that you will go to a museum and you will be told what to think about the Mycenaeans or the Minoans or the Iron age. People expect that and yet what we're saying now is, no, it's a lot more complicated than that, and I personally like to talk about Lindow Man as being a post-modern exhibition. It's an exhibition in which the old certainties are dead and gone, that uncertainty, debate, discussion is being celebrated and it's not a weakness to say that we can't make definitive statements about Lindow Man. It's actually a great strength because we are acknowledging that many different people can take part in this debate.

Julie Wilkinson

So as certain museums like the Manchester Museum believe they're moving forwards, and pagans such as Emma Restell-Orr feel that they're slipping backwards, scientists are resolutely standing their ground. It seems there is much to consider and much to attract a wider public scrutiny.

Lindow Man song

Lindow Man, Lindow Man we want you back again. Now we've found you we want you back again. Now we've found you we want you back again.